

Folklore and the Internet: From the Editor

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As Folklore Forum has transformed from a print publication into an electronic one, our staff has also had some transforming to do. Not least, our technical requirements have shifted; no longer can our all-volunteer student organization proclaim, “no experience necessary,” for we must have at least one person with a ready knowledge of XML and PHP always on hand. But we have also been forced to consider changes in more soul-searching ways, deciding just what it is we are trying to accomplish, and why the technology will help us to accomplish it. This introspection began years before I was ever a part of the conversation, and it continues as new students join in where others left off. The discussion of moving the journal to the Web has brought about a re-working of our publishing group’s name, our mission, our workflow, our hardware, our relationship with Indiana University, our marketing, our record-keeping. Dozens of graduate students have come and gone in the past eight years of transition (some may even give a longer time-frame), causing delays in both print production and electronic changeover. We have often asked why, and we have not always been satisfied with the answers. But something compels us forward, something about being Online.

Perhaps some of the trepidation we feel for combining Folklore and the Internet is a legacy we inherited from our disciplinary predecessors. It seems Folklore has always had an ambivalent relationship with mass media. Salvage ethnography to recover oral texts would be unnecessary if print were not invading 19th century Europe and America and depriving the Folk of their lore. Likewise the movie, television, and commercial publishing industries of the mid-20th century, driven by greedy entrepreneurs into co-opting “authentic” lore for their own ends, sparked scholarly responses of contempt for the mass-produced, Disney-fied “fakelore” of commerce. Nearly all Folklore textbooks sold today, including our own from Trickster Press, avoid most computer-generated genres of lore in their enumerations of what folklorists study. And in most cases, they are justified. Though the trend has been shifting in professional meetings and journal publications, folklorists do tend to avoid the world of computers as a field for enquiry, either because of a lack of technical training or just a lack of general interest.

Yet publications of Internet Culture, Netlore, Online communities, and Web-based ethnographic methods are growing at an enormous rate, even if not written by members of our discipline. Anthropologists and sociologists come to mind, of course, but so do other researchers in more unexpected departments of psychology, communications, informatics, library science, education, physics, business, organizational behavior, political science, and engineering. Beyond the scholarly communities, there is no lack of general interest in the way technology is connecting people from diverse places, institutions, and backgrounds. Some of the popular literature predicts a shining future of interconnectivity that will free our minds of the mundane tasks of scheduling, comparison shopping, managing expiration dates, or even negotiating contracts. Others prophesy a bleak end to the Information Age, when all the servers finally crash and we are left with useless bits of metal and plastic and no memory of ourselves. Surely this discourse in and of itself should excite the minds of folklorists bent on describing the varied expressions of worldview in a people. Our particular orientation to culture and worldview can help people recognize the sameness in all this utopian and doomsday talk with motifs from other media in other traditions of storytelling. Wouldn't this be a welcome contribution for both sides?

There are other connections the Internet can have to Folklore. Besides a tool for scholarly communication in the form of electronic journals, the Web provides multiple services for keeping scholars informed. It is a presentation space for much more than articles in print. Scholarly societies, academic departments, museums, archives, government agencies, and even independent folklorists—all can hang out their shingle and alert one another of their [virtual] presence. Email and instant messaging allow a potential documentary trail of more information to flow faster and more informally today than our predecessors could have imagined, their ponderous correspondence files sitting in our archives notwithstanding. Archives and document services can deliver full-text versions of unpublished photos and manuscripts for our scrutiny at home. And secure Web forms allow us to register for conferences, buy books, sign petitions, even vote for officers and conduct other official business of our scholarly communities.

As the discourse about the Internet circulates in off-line genres and media, so too are old forms repacked into the new bottles of dynamic Websites. Grants for digitization are sought and won on the basis of providing information from the past triumphs of folklore scholarship to the people themselves who made it all possible. Many state-funded folklore agencies are anxious to demonstrate the fieldwork they have carried out, if only to justify their existence to the tax-paying public and the politicians they elect. Yet the inter-

semiotic translation of off-line performance into digital zeros and ones is not often acknowledged in our folklore classes. How do concepts of genre change when digitization occurs? What are the new markers of authenticity? How do we bridge the gaps between actual and virtual texts? The publication/presentation/performance space of the Web brings its own set of venue challenges and opportunities.

The concept for this special issue of *Forum* began as a conversation between Jay Mechling and Matthew Kertchner at an AFS conference more than two years ago. As the two of them lamented together about the lack of a good Folklore text about the Web, Matthew suggested that Trickster Press come up with one. Two years later, without Matthew or Mechling and embroiled in our own publication morass, we felt that a smaller, more exploratory treatment of the subject was all we could manage—and that just barely—at this point. To illustrate the historical context of computer lore, we decided to begin this special issue with a reprint *Forum* article by William Fox from 1983. His discussion of early attempts by folklorists to account for emerging computer network genres ends with a clarion call for more research. Trevor Blank's article addresses the urban legends that circulate in chain letter-form as anonymous emails, an initial inquiry into the burgeoning opportunities for folkloristic fieldwork on the Internet. Monica Foote examines the icons and avatars found on the Internet as cyberart, arguing that the Internet must be perceived as a fertile memetic environment for the transmission and development of folkloric art forms and, thus, a new medium of individual and communal expression.

I encourage our readers to consider how we use the Internet in our work as folklorists, as a object of study in an of itself, with its own discourse of traditional motifs; as a field for ethnographic research into the virtual, networked community; as a means for scholarly communication and publication; as a storage facility for the digitally compressed knowledge of the past; as a presentation space for the mutual benefit of both ethnographer and informant; as a means for reflection, rethinking how we do our work, what draws us to it, and why.